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ABSTRACT

The core curriculum movement, as of 1981, is in crisis and apparently declining. Among the discouraging signs are the abandonment of core curriculum programs by many school districts and the conclusion of a long-time student of the core curriculum movement that the democratic goals of the core curriculum program conflict with the more autocratic nature of the school as a controlled environment. However, schools (like parents) can be authoritative rather than authoritarian. There are also some encouraging signs for the core curriculum, such as the use of core curriculum ideas in the middle school movement, the group guidance movement (emphasizing helping young people deal with their problems), and the general education movement in higher education, where curriculum reformers are moving toward core curriculum or interdisciplinary programs. Several professional organizations are promoting aspects of the core curriculum program. Further, core curriculum ideas sometimes appear in conventional subject areas like science instruction. Educational innovations have in the past been borrowed from the core curriculum movement, and core curriculum programs continue to appear in some school districts. At present the challenge to the National Association for Core Curriculum is to keep the core curriculum idea alive. (RW)

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Gordon F. Vars

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THESE ARE THE TIMES THAT TRY MEN'S SOULS: SOME THOUGHTS ON THE CORE CURRICULUM MOVEMENT, 1981

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Paper presented at the 29th Annual Convention of the National Association for Core Curriculum, Pikesville, MD, October 22nd, 1981.

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The title of these remarks is drawn from Thomas Paine's The Crisis, written December 23, 1776, in the early discouraging days of the American Revolution. Here are his opening words:

> These are the times that try men's souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country; but he that stands it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman.[1]

The core curriculum movement, too, is in a period of crisis. It would be all too easy to look around at our small numbers and decide that core and the NACC are finished. The words of Harvey Overton, written in 1966, seem finally to have come true. He said, "The core curriculum has fallen, and only a handful of the faithful now gather at National Core Conferences to lament its demise."[2] It was easy to refute those assertions in 1966, which I did in my article, "Core Curriculum: Lively Corpse."[3] Nowadays the signs of retreat from the core idea are even more evident.

Discouraging Signs

Many school districts that once had core programs have abandoned them in favor of team teaching or conventional separate subjects. Colleges and universities are closing down their laboratory schools, which frequently were pioneers in core curriculum and other humanistic innovations. Local, state, and regional affiliates of NACC have nearly all ceased to function. Membership in NACC is down, a situation shared by nearly all professional education associations.

To top it off, our own Angela E. Fraley, after years of studying the core movement, tells us in her recent book that core is inevitably doomed to failure. She presents this conclusion both in her doctoral dissertation at Teachers College, Columbia, in 1977[4], and in Schooling and Innovation: The Rhetoric and the Reality, published in 1981.[5] She asserts that core curriculum and similar attempts to introduce democracy into the schools can never work because of the very nature of the school as an institution. Here are some of her observations:

> The contention of the school reformers was that certainly if schools were run as miniature democracies, pupils would experience ideal democracy, recognize its advantages, and become ideal democratic-thinking-and-acting citizens.
>
> Is this possible? With reference to social institutions, a thing is possible only if enough people choose to get together and make it happen. By the very nature of human beings, the ideal democracy is impossible, because it depends on a complete meeting of minds on rules that govern--

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> total acquiescence to a single set of rules for governance of human conduct, with each person applying the rules to himself. It could happen only if human beings were absolutely equal, physically and intellectually, and came into the world understanding and agreeing with the rules in advance. Obviously, teachers cannot conduct a democratic school or classroom regardless of how appealing the idea may sound to school reformers. Democracy as it functions among human beings is a pattern of political pressures--a give and take. Pupils are not at school to exercise political pressures to coax out an education from or for the group, or to compete with the teacher for authority. The democratic choice is always a compromise of privilege, and it includes the freedom to choose not to participate, which is paradoxical to the purpose of going to school.[6]
>
> School is a controlled environment. Its purpose is to provide access to information supplementary to that provided by the family, church, and other social institutions. The singleness of purpose frames the rules of order. The school is by nature autocratic. The teacher is in charge, and is responsible to a principal who is similarly in charge.[7]

If Ann is right, we might as well quit, go home, and concentrate on teaching students to read, write, cypher, and memorize facts, which she seems to suggest!

But I do not think Ann is right in this instance. She is a thorough scholar and writes incisively about core and other innovations in her thought-provoking book. But I believe she has not accurately assessed the nature of the school and the schooling process in a democratic society.

It is true that many schools are autocratic, but they do not have to be, any more than all parents have to be arbitrary and authoritarian in the way they rear their children. Research on child-rearing reveals a very important distinction between "authoritarian parenting" and "authoritative parenting". I believe that these same distinctions apply to the school as an institution. Here is the way these terms are explained by Dr. John P. Hill, a noted researcher and fellow of the Center for the Study of Youth Development, Boys' Town, Nebraska:

> "The authoritative parent is supportive but not suffocating, is not afraid of making standards known, values disciplined behavior that is monitored by self-control, and engenders such behavior by reasoning and explaining in verbal give-and-take with the child.
>
> In contrast, the 'authoritarian parent' is more obedience-centered and dogmatic, offers orders rather than engaging in verbal give-and-take, and is less likely to reason with or explain to the child."[8]

Of course the school must be a controlled environment, but that very control can be used to teach democratic processes of interaction and problem-solving. Rosalind Zapf Pickard demonstrated and documented these procedures many years ago in her classroom teaching, in her book, Democratic Processes in the Secondary Classroom,[9] and in her set of sound filmstrips entitled Teaching the Democratic Processes at the Secondary Level.[10]

The choice is not between authoritarianism and license, both of which are anathema, but between either of these extremes and the careful nurturance of democratic skills and attitudes in an authoritative manner; that is, by gradually giving students more and more freedom as they demonstrate increasing capacity to handle it responsibly. I have seen this done in many core classrooms, including my own. It is not easy, but it can be done.

So I reject the Fraley thesis and assert that the theoretical under-pinnings of core curriculum are as sound today as ever. And, of course, if there was ever a time

when democratically sophisticated citizens were needed it is now, for we are in the midst of a major retreat from reason and rationality exemplified by the actions of the so-called "moral majority."

Encouraging Signs

The Middle School Movement. One hopeful sign of the vitality of the core idea may be found in the middle school movement. Even if NACC went out of business and all the literature on core were to disappear overnight, core would be re-invented the next day in middle schools throughout the country. The situation in many middle schools is very similar to that in the early "core" schools of the 1930's and 1940's; namely, a commitment to interdisciplinary teaming plus a focus on the needs of students. This was the very mix out of which core arose in those decades. Wilford Aiken points out in his Story of the Eight Year Study[11] that after working in teams for awhile, many teachers chose to go it alone, having learned both core content and methods from their teammates.

The Group Guidance Movement. Other encouraging signs may be found in the group guidance movement. Teacher advisory or home-base programs, prominent in middle school literature and practice, are also being promoted at the high school level. Commercially-prepared and packaged programs like QUEST[12] and the Life Skills Training materials of James Cisek[13], to name but a few, come very close to core in their focus on helping young people deal with their problems and concerns. Without core's large block of time, these programs cannot go as far or as deep in exploring these problems, but they certainly are a step in the right direction.

The General Education Movement. At the very time that secondary schools seem to be abandoning core, colleges and universities are picking up the idea and running with it. From Harvard to Stanford, East Texas State to the University of Wisconsin at Green Bay, countless colleges are revising their general education requirements to make them coherent. We have carried descriptions of a number of these in THE CORE TEACHER, including St. Joseph's College in Indiana, St. Anselm's in New Hampshire, New College at the University of Alabama, Evergreen State College in Washington, and, most recently, Lincoln Christian College in Illinois.

Books on general education and "interdisciplinarity" are coming out faster than we can review them in the newsletter. Recent titles include: The Great Core Curriculum Debate,[14] Interdisciplinarity in Higher Education,[15] Interdisciplinarity, the Mutable Paradigm,[16] General Education: Issues and Resources,[17] Interdisciplinary (That Much Abused Word),[18] Interdisciplinary Studies,[19] and A Quest for Common Learnings.[20]

Thousands of dollars in grant money are being spent to help college personnel develop new programs. One of the most important undertakings was Project General Education Models (GEM) which involved thirteen institutions. In the final issue of the Project newsletter, Gerry. G. Gaff, Project Director, makes these observations:

> Perhaps the most powerful substantive change that has taken place on most campuses is in the realm of educational philosophy that provides the foundation for general education. Faculty after faculty has declared, in one way or another, that it is not sufficient for students to become specialists, no matter how technically proficient; instead, the ideal of a specialist with a broad general education is being reaffirmed. Further, schools are reasserting that students, in order to be well educated, must grasp certain historical, literary, social, and scientific concepts and methods. . .

> Ten schools have provided for integration, not being satisfied with students mastering fragments of different disciplines. Freshman seminars or orientation courses, interdisciplinary courses, clusters of thematically related courses, and senior capstone seminars or projects are various forms utilized to achieve integrative learning.[21]

Interdisciplinarity is not core, of course, but it is leaning in that direction. Consider, for example, this definition by Richard Meeth in his article, "Interdisciplinary Studies: A Matter of Definition":

> The highest level of integrated study is transdisciplinary, which is not of the disciplines at all. Transdisciplinary means beyond the disciplines. Whereas interdisciplinary programs start with the discipline, transdisciplinary programs start with the issue or problem and, through the process of problem solving, bring to bear the knowledge of those disciplines that contribute to the solution or resolution.[22]

Developing a core program in higher education is frightfully difficult, even more so than in middle and high schools. Yet a number of colleges, notably St. Joseph's College in Rensselaer, IN, have moved very close to the core ideal. Unless the NACC moves vigorously to become involved with this burgeoning movement, we will have been by-passed by the major current manifestation of the core idea, in my opinion.

Those of us working at the college level must reach out to help our liberal arts colleagues who are wrestling with this matter. We will not necessarily be accepted, of course. My offer was ignored at Kent State University, where a faculty committee labored mightily for two years and brought forth a mere list of distribution requirements.

Organizations. The core idea in some form also is being promoted by other professional organizations. At the college level, the Association for Integrative Studies[23] is in its third year and suffering the usual growing pains of a small organization. General education and interdisciplinarity also receive increasing attention in the publications and conferences of other higher education organizations, such as the Association for General and Liberal Studies.[24]

A number of organizations promoting some form of "humanistic" education reflect the general philosophy of core as set forth in our NACC position paper, Core Today: Rationale and Implications,[25] and several more specialized groups advocate certain aspects of the core idea. For example, the Council for the Advancement of Experiential Education[26] shares our emphasis on learning by doing. The Alliance for Invitational Education[27] recognizes the primacy of student motivation and the importance of teachers and students sharing in the learning enterprise.

Developments in the Subject Areas. From time to time core ideas appear in the work of specialists in the conventional subject areas. For example, science educators seem to be re-inventing core curriculum, as exemplified by these goals of science education for the 1980's derived by Robert Yager from Project Synthesis, a study supported by the National Science Foundation:

> An effective science program for the 80's will utilize the human being, human potential, human advances, and human adaptation as organizers. . .
>
> A second goal. . .will be use of current problems and issues as organizers. . .

> A third goal focuses on processes. . .those processes that can be used by the learner generally in our society. . .
>
> A fourth goal for desired science programs suggests the importance of practice with decision-making skills that use scientific knowledge in a social context. . .
>
> A fifth goal. . .emphasizes career awareness. . .
>
> A sixth goal deals with value, ethical, and moral considerations. . .[28]

The proposed science curriculum also contains many core ideas. For example, Yager states that the curriculum should be problem-centered, flexible, and culturally as well as scientifically valid. It should include the human as a central ingredient, be multifaceted with a local and community relevance, focus on use of the natural environment, community resources, and current concerns, and present scientific information that can be used and applied by students in a cultural/social environment.[29]

Science instruction should be individualized and personalized, and emphasize cooperative work on problems and issues, according to Yager. Evaluation should stress the use of knowlege to interpret personal and social problems and issues, plus growth in rational decision-making strategies.

No doubt other subject matter specialists are rediscovering the need for a human focus in education. Those who have long been associated with the core movement may have mixed feelings as they see other organizations promoting core ideas. At the 1969 NACC convention, Benjamin Cox recognized the core movement as a source of educational innovations and expressed amazement that it had survived the theft of many of its ideas:

> The core idea continues to breathe its influence in so-called innovations that were pioneered years before in core classrooms. Problem-centered learning, discovery learning, and inductive teaching, in addition to combined studies, double periods, and nongraded classrooms, can all be traced to early core literature and classroom practice. . .Often reported dying and occasionally pronounced dead, the core curriculum has survived the attacks of the academicians, the administrators, and the noncore teachers in the schools. It has survived the theft of its greatest curriculum ideas and teaching strategies and has survived, if not flourished, amid misinterpretation, misunderstanding, and misrepresentation of its intentions and conduct. Core has shown remarkable flexibility in adapting itself to many patterns, delimitations, and contents.[30]

It would be nice if more people recognized the core roots of their "innovations," and, better yet, worked with NACC to keep all these ideas together in one broad concept.

Random Rediscoveries. Core and other interdisciplinary programs turn up in many places. By scanning the conference programs of various national educational associations I have uncovered block-time programs in Sandy, Utah, and Olympia, Washington. Occasionally letters to NACC headquarters from "out of the blue" indicate some core interest and activity. Recently we received a request for our films on block-time teaching from the North Slope school district in Alaska and also a query from a professor at Sheldon Jackson College in Sitka, Alaska, who says he is teaching a course on "core curricular methods." In the absence of any thorough nationwide study of core

practices, these random reports are intriguing and heartening.

Conclusion

Amidst both the discouraging and the encouraging signs, the challenge to the National Association for Core Curriculum is to keep the core idea alive. It should not be necessary for teachers to learn the hard way how to develop a meaningful unit through teacher-student planning, because the techniques were perfected long ago in core classrooms and are available in the literature. If they were familiar with the history of core programs at colleges and universities, professors would be forewarned of the difficulties they will face and could more successfully work with various college departments to design interdisciplinary programs. Middle school administrators should know the relative advantages and disadvantages of core compared with interdisciplinary teaming when setting up new programs. Fledgling organizations like the Association for Integrative Studies or the Council for the Advancement of Experiental Learning could learn much from some of us about what one can realistically accomplish in a small organization that meets once a year and has no full-time central office staff.

In other words, we are needed--both as individuals and as an organization. Core is not an "impossible dream," but a vision of what can be if we will put our minds and hearts to it. These times of widespread conservatism and mistrust of education will pass, but we must not merely wait complacently until the new wave of progressive, humanistic education comes along. Now is not the time to relax!

As the saying goes, "When the going gets tough, the tough get going!" Or, as Thomas Paine put it:

> Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered; yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph. What we obtain too cheap, we esteem too lightly; . . .[31]

I trust that you esteem core curriculum as dearly as I do, and that you will rededicate yourselves to promoting that ideal with all your might. Like any ideal, it is something we aspire to but never reach. Core is not only a vision of better education for young people but it is also a way to promote the ideals of democracy that guided our forefathers in their seemingly hopeless struggle to establish this nation. They did it, and we can do it, too. Let us not be summer soldiers or sunshine patriots, but remain firmly dedicated to keeping the core ideal, not only alive, but growing.

And the encouraging signs I have pointed out should make it possible for us to "travel hopefully." Robert Louis Stevenson said that to travel hopefully is better than to arrive, and the true reward is to labor. If we labor <u>together</u>, maintaining our sense of community in NACC even though we meet only once a year and are scattered across the nation, we have some hope of success. If NACC were to have a theme song these days, it would be these words from Rodgers and Hammerstein:

When you walk through a storm,
Keep your head up high
And don't be afraid of the dark.

At the end of a storm
Is a golden sky
And the sweet silver song of a lark.

Walk on through the wind,
Walk on through the rain,
Though your dreams be tossed and blown.

Walk on, walk on, with hope in your heart
And you'll never walk alone,
You'll never walk alone.

NOTES

1. Thomas Paine, "The Crisis," in Selections from the Writings of Thomas Paine, ed. Sherman F. Mittell. (Washington, DC: National Home Library Foundation, 1935), p. 41.

2. Harvey Overton, "The Rise and Fall of the Core Curriculum," Clearing House, Vol. 40, No. 9 (May, 1966), p. 532.

3. Gordon F. Vars, "Core Curriculum: Lively Corpse," Clearing House, Vol. 42, No. 9 (May, 1968), pp. 515-519.

4. Angela E. Fraley, "Core Curriculum: An Epic in the History of Educational Reform." Unpublished Ed. D. dissertation, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1977. Dissertation Abstracts, Vol. 38, No. 10 (April, 1978), p. 5883-A.

5. _____, Schooling and Innovation: The Rhetoric and the Reality. (New York: Tyler Gibson Publishers, 1981).

6. Op. cit., p. 212.

7. Op. cit., p. 215.

8. John P. Hill, "The Family," in Toward Adolescence: The Middle School Years. 79th Yearbook, Part I. National Society for the Study of Education. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980., pp. 34-35.

9. Rosalind Zapf Pickard, Democratic Processes in the Secondary Classroom. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1959).

10. _____, Teaching Democratic Processes at the Secondary Level. (Tarrytown, NY: Prentice-Hall Media, 1967). Four filmstrips and records.

11. Wilford Aiken, The Story of the Eight-Year Study. (New York: Harper, 1942), p. 850.

12. See: Pat E. Crisci, "QUEST: Helping Students Learn Caring and Responsibility," Phi Delta Kappan, Vol. 63, No. 2 (October, 1981), pp. 131-133; Quest, Inc., 2703 North Main Street, Findlay, OH 45840.

13. James Cisek, Finding Solutions. (Chicago: Life Skills Training Associates, 1980). Teacher's manual and student workbook. Also Why Is It Always Me? Film.

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16. Mayville, William V., Interdisciplinarity: the Mutable Paradigm, AAHE-ERIC Higher Education Research Report No. 9. (Washington, DC: American Association for Higher Education, 1978).

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NOTES (con't)

18. "Interdisciplinarity (That Much Abused Word)." Teaching-Learning Issues, No. 30, Winter, 1976. (Knoxville, TN: Learning Research Center, University of Tennessee).

19. "Interdisciplinary Studies." Report on Teaching: 6. Change Magazine, Vol. 10, No. 7 (August, 1978). Special issue.

20. Ernest L. Boyer and Arthur Levine, A Quest for Common Learning: The Aims of General Education (Washington, DC: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1981.)

21. Gerry G. Gaff, "New Directions for General Education," GEM Newsletter, No. 7 (August, 1981), p. 12.

22. L. Richard Meeth, "Interdisciplinary Studies: A Matter of Definition," in Report on Teaching: 6. Change Magazine, Vol. 10, No. 7 (August, 1978), p. 10.

23. Association for Integrative Studies, c/o Jerry Petr, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Lincoln, NE 68588.

24. Association for General and Liberal Studies, c/o David Giese, General College, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN 55455.

25. Core Today: Rationale and Implications. Rev. ed. (Kent, OH: National Association for Core Curriculum, Inc., 1980).

26. Council for the Advancement of Experiential Education, Lakefront North, Suite 300, Columbia, MD 21044.

27. Alliance for Invitational Education, Curry Building, School of Education, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, Greensboro, NC 27412.

28. Robert E. Yager, "Science Education." ASCD Curriculum Update, (September, 1981), np.

29. Ibid.

30. C. Benjamin Cox, "Involving the Learner in the Multiple Core," Ideas Educational, Vol. 9, No. 1. (Fall, 1970, p. 21.

31. Thomas Paine, op. cit., p. 41.